

Teaching English lexically: the University Word List Is a Good Start

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Abstract

The role of vocabulary has been downplayed in the past decades. Only until the recent years has vocabulary begun to receive some initial attentions. Meanwhile, effective classroom methods and practices targeting on the acquisition of vocabulary are limited and often inconclusive. There is an urgent need for exploring the possibility of lexis-based ESL/EFL teaching and learning methods. In an attempt to construct an ideal lexis-focused methodology, this paper reviews the treatment of vocabulary both in theories and practices of ESL/EFL education. It next discusses major issues concerning L2 vocabulary acquisition. To meet the classroom needs, this paper proposes that the University Word List is an easy start. Examining the applicability of University Word List, this paper reports on a pilot study where L2 graduate students were tested on their knowledge of words from the University Word List. The results suggest a shared core vocabulary among the participants seems to exist.

Keywords: vocabulary, ESL/EFL, University Word List

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary is prominent in language learning and lexical competence is also at the very heart of communicative competence, i.e., the ability to communicate successfully and appropriately; however, the role of vocabulary has been neglected and underestimated in the past (Zimmerman, 1997a; O'Dell, 1997). Many second language acquisition researchers and teachers typically prioritize syntax and phonology over vocabulary, as they believe that vocabulary could take care of itself and be acquired naturally without any emphasis. The low status of vocabulary instruction is caused by the dominant language teaching approaches which downplay the importance of vocabulary in the past fifty years of ESL/EFL field.

The paper will first provide an overview on the role of ESL/EFL vocabulary instruction. Then it will discuss the recent development of L2 vocabulary acquisition. Next, it presents a discussion that centers on the major issues related to the teaching and learning of vocabulary, followed by a section that evaluates some effective strategies of teaching and learning vocabulary. Finally, a mini survey on Nation's (1984) University Word List is presented along with its implications. A brief conclusion that summarizes some possible contributions of this synthesis paper is included in the end.

HISTORICAL REVIEW

When the Grammar Translation Method was first introduced to teach modern language with a strong emphasis on accuracy and explicit grammar rule, vocabulary received limited attention and was only selected to illustrate grammar rule (Schmitt, 2000). The bilingually written word lists which presented new words in isolation were an important resource for student's vocabulary learning. In the 1970s, while Audio-Lingual Method was dominating, language learning was believed to be a process of habit formation. Systematic attentions were paid to pronunciation and oral drilling of sentence pattern. The vocabulary teaching had to be relatively simple since the primary focus was on grammatical and phonological structure. New words were introduced only if they were needed to make drill possible (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). During that particular period, the idea that learning too much vocabulary early in the language learning process gives students a false sense of security was maintained (Zimmerman, 1997a). Later, the Communicative Language Teaching in the 80s, once again gave vocabulary a secondary status. CLT gives a little guidance about how to handle vocabulary since it primarily focused on the meanings, the appropriate uses, and the communicative competence of L2. Vocabulary was taught mainly as support for functional language use. It was assumed that if L2 learning took place in communicatively meaning contexts, vocabulary would take care of itself (Schmitt 2000).

Only in the Vocabulary Control Movement did vocabulary receive significant attention. During the Vocabulary Control movement, the first attempt to compile a list of minimum necessary English vocabulary appeared under the influence of Ogden and Richards (cited in Schmitt, 2000) whose works are known as "Basic English" consisting of 850 words. The second

attempt, partially reacting to the Direct Method, was collectively recorded in the Carnegie Report (in Schmitt, 2000) in which word frequency was the main criterion in selecting words. This list containing about 2000 words and was eventually published as the “General Service List of English Words” by West in 1953 (Nation, 1990). For the first time, vocabulary was treated as one of the most important aspects of L2 learning.

CURRENT TRENDS

The current trend of L2 vocabulary instruction focuses on natural occurring discourse and emphasize that words should be always learned in context than in isolated word lists (Nattinger, 1988). Besides, with the assistance of computer-aided research, the status of vocabulary has changed dramatically within the last two decades because the corpus studies was providing huge amounts of database and information about how words are actual used in English. The COBUILD project (Sinclair and Renouf, 1988) contains a corpus of 20 million words, accounting for patterns of phrase and clause sequence in actual English use.

New directions of the L2 vocabulary learning and teaching first call attention for the study of word relationship, such as collocations, i.e., words’ co-occurrence that happens very often and more frequently than would happen by chance (Seal, 1991; Schmitt and McCarthy, 1997; Koprowski, 2005). Researchers begin to believe that best vocabulary learning involves learning frequent chunks, such as collocations, lexical phrases, and idioms, rather than learning by the process of piecing together isolated words. Learning language chunks enables learners to achieve native-like fluency because those frequent lexical chunks are what native speaker uses in everyday conversation.

Secondly, the integration of lexical syllabus into former topic-, notion-, or function-based syllabuses has been emphasized (Willis, 1990). Willis believes that a lexical syllabus based on naturalistic and authentic use of language would reconcile the contradiction between the traditional methodologies and the Communicative Approach (i.e., CA). Both of these two groups have been proved to be somehow inefficient as the former ones itemize and piece language, the CA treats language too holistically. The lexical syllabus that exposes learners to language items in natural contexts (like collocations) enables them to learn from their own experience.

Finally, Lewis (1993) proposes the integration of the Communicative Approach into classroom activities with a focus on naturally occurring vocabulary. Embracing most of the assumption of the Communicative Approach to language teaching, he introduces “Lexical Approach” which is a lexical-based teaching method that emphasized on the acquisition of multiword phrases, including polywords, collocations, fixed and semi-fixed expression. In Lewis’s view of language, he claims that lexical items are central to both language use and teaching as “language consists of grammaticalized lexis, not lexicalized grammar” (p. 89).

MAJOR ISSUES IN THE TEACHING AND LEARNING OF VOCABULARY

Main issues centering on L2 vocabulary acquisition include: 1) the definition of word knowledge, 2) explicit versus implicit vocabulary teaching, and 3) the selection and sequencing of vocabulary.

The Definition of Word Knowledge

Many researchers have debated the argument about whether we should emphasize the receptive or productive knowledge of a word, even though they all recognize the complicate nature of vocabulary (Channell, 1988; Stoller and Grabe, 1997). Channell defines L2 vocabulary acquisition as 1) the meaning of an L2 word can be recognized and understood both in and out of context, and 2) it can be used naturally and appropriately to situation (p. 84). Based on her definition, receptive knowledge precedes productive one, as acquisition of individual vocabulary comprises first comprehension, then production. However, Stoller and Grabe argue that it is too simple and general to consider the notion of “receptive” and “productive” of vocabulary learning.

From a different perspective, Nation (1990) proposes that a native speaker must master all of the followings in order to “know a word”: the meaning(s), written and spoken form, grammatical behavior, collocations, register, association, and frequency of the word. Adding to Nation’s definition, Schmitt and McCarthy (1997) note that such a list gives just a descriptive picture of a word, it is best to think of vocabulary knowledge as an integrated whole. In addition, Gu (1994) perhaps provides the best definition for the minimum word knowledge an L2 learner needs to know in her case studies of the specific vocabulary learning strategies used by Taiwanese EFL students. She reports that knowing a word should at least include the form, the referential meaning, and the basic syntactic behavior of each word.

Implicit versus Explicit Teaching of Vocabulary

Debates on whether vocabulary should be taught explicitly or implicitly have been severe. The current consensus can be best summarized as the followings:

- 1) The beginning learners need more explicit /direct vocabulary instruction before reaching a threshold level. Two to three thousand high-frequency words are considered a minimum “threshold” that enables incidental learning to take place when reading authentic texts (DeCarrico, 2001).
- 2) As learners proceed, indirect vocabulary teaching will gradually take over the direct emphasis of vocabulary. Most low-frequency words can be learned incidentally through extensive reading as stated by Coady (1993) that, “there is a gradual but steady incremental growth of vocabulary knowledge through meaningful interaction with text” (p. 18).
- 3) Beyond the threshold level, students’ learning of new words is taken care of by conducting reading directly, including free, pleasure, or extensive reading. Day and Bamford (1998) claim that learning vocabulary from multiple encounters can make the incidental learning

easier. Therefore, teachers need to encourage students to expose in the multiple texts in order to acquire vocabulary incidentally.

In sum, it is reasonable to conclude that the focuses of vocabulary instruction differ at different proficiency levels.

The Selection and Sequencing of vocabulary

Other than choosing between explicit and implicit vocabulary instruction, it is also necessary to decide what vocabulary will be selected for teaching and how it will be sequenced. While recognizing the beginners' paradox in learning vocabulary, L2 vocabulary researchers all underscore the importance of the core vocabulary. Current available word lists are recommended as a good starting point. West's *General Service List* of 2000 high-frequency headwords is the most quoted one. For English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners, Xue and Nation (1984) add 836 more words in their *University Word List*, with which they claim that these two lists will cover 95% of words used in most English texts. Though additional high-frequency words are further suggested, a core vocabulary consisting of the most common 3000-5000 words is recognized and accepted by most L2 researchers (Laufer, 1997). These core vocabulary deserve first attention while other low-frequency words can only be learned by incidental learning through repetitive encounters in L2 reading (Nation, 1990; Stroller and Grabe, 1997)

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING VOCABULARY

Vocabulary Teaching

Effective strategies of vocabulary teaching can be further divided into two kinds: "unplanned" and "planned" vocabulary teaching. According to Seal (1991), unplanned teaching refers to "the extemporaneous teaching of problem vocabulary items that come up without warning in the course of lesson," whereas planned teaching is that "teacher goes into classroom with an item or a set of vocabulary items that s/he has decided beforehand will be taught during the course of the lesson" (p. 298).

To prepare for unplanned vocabulary teaching when students ask for explanation of a specific word, Seal suggests the "3Cs technique"—convey, check, and consolidate—is useful to apply in the classroom. First, the teacher should convey word meanings by using visual aids, word relations, and presenting contexts. Then, the teacher checks that the student has understood properly by doing various exercises, such as filling in the blank or matching pair. Finally, the teacher should consolidate and try to get the students to relate the word to their personal experience and use it in the meaningful contexts.

Concerning the planned vocabulary teaching, Laufer (1997) and Schmitt (2000) suggest that the mastering of the core vocabulary and a large sight vocabulary (i.e., words whose form and common meaning are recognized automatically, irrespective of contexts) help beginners breakthrough the below-threshold plateau. Beyond threshold, teachers and students should

equally participate in the teaching and learning process. Teachers are encouraged to conduct needs analysis before giving any further vocabulary instruction (Zimmerman, 1997b).

Class activities in teaching vocabulary should be set up to meet the following criteria according to Zimmerman (1997b) and Sokmen (1997). They believe that effective approaches to vocabulary learning should be multifaceted, including:

- 1) exposures to words in meaningful contexts and in four skill activities;
- 2) connection between new and old words;
- 3) rich and elaborative rehearsal about each word (e.g., describing word meanings, arranging word orders, and providing collocational information for each word);
- 4) use of various techniques (e.g., word unit analysis, mnemonic devices, semantic mapping, dictionary skills);
- 5) multiple exposures to words;
- 6) active participation by students in learning process.

Furthermore, Hatch and Brown (1995) and Zimmerman (1997b) propose the use of students' self-generating vocabulary as they all anticipate that ultimately students become independent vocabulary learners capable of determining their needs and applying learner strategies to handle each newly encountered word.

Vocabulary Learning

Using different learning strategies simultaneously will undoubtedly facilitate learners' incidental learning of new vocabulary items. Generally speaking, learners if attempting to learn vocabulary independently and successfully should use a combination of extensive reading (incidental learning) and self-study strategies (DeCarrico, 2001). DeCarrico (2001) specifically offers several useful strategies for learning vocabulary: 1) guessing meaning from context, 2) mnemonic devices, and 3) keeping vocabulary notebook.

The guessing strategy has been often discussed in the reading skill, but it can also be used while learning vocabulary. The basic steps of operating this strategy include first deciding the part of the speech of the unknown word and examining the context of the clause. Then, the next step is looking at the relationship between this clause and other sentences and finally using knowledge gained from such clues to guess the meaning of the word. Besides, mnemonic devices, known as "keyword method," is an aid to memory which helps learners to link word form and its meaning in order to consolidate this linkage in memory. Learners should learn to concentrate on remembering the image of interaction between the keyword and the foreign words. Finally, keeping vocabulary notebooks in a loose-leaf binder or index card file can help learners visualize the association and relationship between the new words and familiar words.

In a study where learners were asked to rank their vocabulary-learning methods, Zimmerman (1997b) also discussed some effective vocabulary learning strategies. The results are presented in the following from the lowest ranking to highest one:

- 1) study roots and affixes,
- 2) study the dictionary,
- 3) memorize lists of words,
- 4) conduct enjoyable reading of students' own choice
- 5) design class lessons where the teacher gives students chances to use new words in natural environment.

It is obvious that students place more value on contextualized learning methods than drills, memorization, and rote activities. The research results also provide a good indication for teachers when they try to design the lesson for vocabulary teaching.

A PILOT STUDY ON THE UNIVERSITY WORD LIST

Procedure of the Vocabulary Test

Since many researchers proclaim the use of University Word List in vocabulary teaching as it covers over 95 % of frequent words used in academic English setting, it is necessary for teachers to know whether this list is a good place to start and apply. In order to understand the applicability of this word list, the researcher designed a vocabulary test that was made of fifteen fill-in-the-blank sentences (see Appendix) with the target word left out. The fifteen questions containing the tested words are all randomly selected from the book, Mastery: A University Word List Reader (Valcourt and Wells, 1999), a textbook based on Nation's (1984) University Word List. Then, eighteen ESL graduate students from English department at a mid size university in northeast America were invited to take this test. Only fourteen of them returned the tests, leaving four of the tests invalid. The results of the vocabulary test are summarized in the following Table 1:

Table 1: Results of Student Performance on the Vocabulary Test

Students	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	AVER.
No. of correct questions	15	14	14	15	15	13	13	14	12	12	12	14	14	15	13.71
Accuracy Percentage	100%	93%	93%	100%	100%	86%	86%	93%	80%	80%	80%	93%	93%	100%	91.4%

Note: S1 = student one; the student number is assigned randomly. AVER. = average.

Of all the fourteen students, four have answered all of the fifteen questions correctly. Five people have gotten fourteen questions while two of the subjects have scored thirteen items, thus leaving the last three who actually have answered only twelve questions accurately. Besides, the averaged number of correct responses is nearly fourteen (i.e., 13.71) with a total averaged accuracy of 91.4 percent. Overall, it seems possible to conclude that these students

have all demonstrated considerable understanding of the high frequency words from University Word List (i.e., in their productive knowledge of these words).

Discussions of the Results of the Vocabulary Test

Some assumptions can be made based on the test results. First, these subjects who are already enrolled in an American graduate program seem to have acquired a significant amount of vocabulary. This could lead us to believe that there is a core vocabulary shared by most EFL programs in the curriculum used in the subjects' home countries. And the teaching of the core vocabulary is very successful in these EFL programs as well. Second, their high accuracy in this test might be used to suggest that the University Word List is, to a certain extent, trustable. L2 students who pass the college levels have shown their understanding of all these tested items. Finally, it is likely that there is still a degree of difficulty among the words recorded in the Word List.

The Existence of Core Vocabulary

From the fourteen subjects' performance, there seemed to be a group of shared vocabulary that has been long learned by them. At least, at least twelve words in the original vocabulary test are likely to be components of this core vocabulary because most of these knew them already. Another possible conclusion can be reached is that these students need to learn these words to pass the threshold level in order to demonstrate their overall proficiency and to be able to study and participate in an English speaking environment.

The Effectiveness of University Word List

The students' high accuracy in the test items also suggested that the University Word List might have been convincing. As these students are all currently attending the graduate school here in the US, their knowledge of English vocabulary need to achieve a certain level. If it is really like what many EFL/ESL scholars and researchers have claimed that the University Word List contained all the words an L2 student need to know in order to function appropriately in a college where the instruction is given in English, the fourteen subjects who answered 91% of the words selected from the University Word List have all proven to acquire most of the words in the list. Therefore, it somehow indicated that the University Word List is actually dependable and can be used as a beginning for regular ESL/EFL vocabulary instruction.

The Level of Difficulty among Words in the University Word List

Besides, there appears to be some differences in the degree of difficulty among the words in the University Word List. When examining the items that were answered most frequently and least frequently in the vocabulary test, a distinction was found between some of the easiest and the most difficult words. The group of the easy words includes words like

“terrorist,” “finance,” “reveal,” and “evolve” because they have received the most number of correct responses. On the other hand, words like “enrich,” “aware,” “complicate,” and “series (in the phrase, World Series)” belong to the most difficult group since nearly no one from the fourteen subjects had ever answered any of these four items correctly.

The level of abstractness in the meaning of the words could cause possible reasons affecting the learning difficulty. For example, words in the easy group are all more concrete than their counterparts in the most difficult group. The meanings of “terrorist” and “finance” are nouns that denote clear concept or objects. Meanwhile, the other two verbs, “reveal” and “evolve” are quite clear and refer to the actions which seemed to be shared by most people.

On the contrary, the three more challenging words were a little tricky. Words like “enrich,” “aware,” and “complicate” are used mostly for abstract concepts. The difficulty posed by the last one, “series,” may have resulted from the context where this word was placed. As it was used in the phrase, “the World Series...,” it could have been an unfamiliar term to anyone who does not know American professional baseball regardless of his/her first language or nationality. The lack of the contextual or cultural clue should be considered for this issue particularly.

Implication of the University Word List

Before drawing any further conclusions on the vocabulary test, it should be noted that no generalization would be made based on the outcomes of this mini test. Since the sample is so small, no strict sampling has been done, and the subjects do not cover all of the foreign languages spoken in the other countries, this test should be considered as a trial test used to examine the effectiveness of the University Word List. Nevertheless, it can be inferred from the test results that: 1) L2 students must acquire a core academic vocabulary in order to use English appropriately in an English-speaking college. 2) The University Word List seems to be dependable and might be used effectively to teach L2 learners who plan to study in a university level. 3) Further research may need to be conducted in order to find out whether there is still a group of more challenging words among the 2836 words in the University Word List that deserve special attention.

CONCLUSION

This paper attempts to examine the role of vocabulary in ESL/EFL classroom from the past to the present. Despite its lower status historically, the studies of ESL/EFL vocabulary acquisition have gained a huge amount of interests in the past two decades. In this paper, some major issues and effective strategies regarding teaching and learning vocabulary have also been discussed in order to provide both teachers and learners a good starting point. Finally, the results of mini vocabulary test give its support to the adaptation of the University Word List in ESL/EFL classroom.

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Appendix

1. Any car that would appeal to young customers would have to have three main f_____es: great styling, strong performance, and a low price.
2. To be truly a_____c, a machine must be capable of functioning without the assistance of an operator.
3. The S_____e Court is the final court of appeal in the United States.
4. Migration, commerce, and political change continue to c_____e language patterns in many parts of Asia.
5. The t_____ts who are responsible for the bomb explosion are finally brought to justice.
6. The World S_____s is a postseason match in professional baseball between champions of the National League and the American League.
7. Maggie has finally decided to w_____w her fifth course for this semester because she said she couldn't take it anymore.
8. Chemical sprays are sometimes used to e_____e harmful insects.
9. Scientists believe that, over millions of years, all animals e_____ed from single-celled organisms.
10. Students may go the f_____e aid office for help in obtaining grants, loans, and scholarships.
11. World famous opera, ballet, and theater e_____h the cultural life of New York City.
12. His diaries r_____l many things that were not known about his personal life.
13. The Napa River valley is an excellent area for farming: the soil is f_____e, and the weather is perfect for growing many types of crops.
14. "Cloning" human cells to produce human beings is a c_____l idea. People have very different opinion about it.
15. A playwright must be constantly a_____e of the audience in the writing, structure, and timing of a play.